

Narration of George Wright Sill, as interviewed by his son Robert F. Sill

October 16, 1966

I was born a mile and a half from the Jackson County line in a log cabin. My aunt lived about 2 miles from there. Well, we didn't have nothing but log cabins, log houses, in those days and a fireplace and we always kept a fire through winter- and summer. If it went out we would have to go to the neighbors to borrow fire because there was no matches or coal oil lamps to be found in the County. We kids would have to go maybe two or three miles to a neighbor's to borrow fire, to build a fire in the fireplace.

From there on around evening my aunt would run a loom. Us kids would card cotton and wool, pick the seeds out of the cotton then card it so she could make her carpets, make her clothes, jeans and all, stuff, blankets and yarn and everything. Us kids, when she'd be weaving carpet one would get on one side and the other on the other and put the shuttle through, what they call a shuttle, it rode backwards and forwards and I'd work the pedals to make the weaving. We'd get sleepy and go out to the apple hole and get apples and Aunt Ann would pop corn, a big pan full, two or three pounds full of, we'd eat apples, popcorn, and drink water awhile and then we'd go back to work. We'd work until about 9 o'clock. We slept on the trundle bed. Us kids would lay out the big bed with no coil springs or nothing like that as coils. We slept on a trundle bed, that is it slipped in under the big bed, it was out of the way all of the time. We'd eat popcorn a while, eat apples out of the hole. We'd always hole up apples in the summer time, for the winter. We'd eat apples and popcorn awhile and then we'd all go back to work weaving and carding. We'd have a great time; us kids would be eating popcorn and everything.

Question: Did you go to school?

We went to school in a log cabin, and had slabs to sit on, just a board across that straddled the desk.

Question.- How far were you from school ?

About a mile and a half, or two miles, I guess.

Question: How many years did you go to school?

Well, I didn't go very many because I didn't have the clothes to go. Kids at that time, we always had a hard winter, more harder than we have now. And I know we lived there awhile till my father died, he got hung on a crane and broke his collar bone and shoulders and he walked four miles to Cobden from McCrea four and a half miles and had his collar bone worked on and then he walked back up the railroad to the, home, we lived about a mile from the railroad and he walked to Cobden about 3 and a half miles.

Question: How old were you then ?

I was just a very small child then. I remember one time we was, well, we lived on a road and a

circus, a big circus, like Ringling Bros. now. They traveled by the road, elephants and lions and everything traveled by the road, the hard road. I know us kids lived right on the road and the show came along and liked to scared us kids to death to see the camels and the elephants all walking down the road. The lions and other wild animals had to put in a cage and they pulled them with horses, oxen, they didn't have no horses, many of these -----I'd go watch them pass, oh, it would take them an hour and half, I guess, to pass the house, we lived right on the road, That is about all I remember of that.

Question: When did you start carpentry and blacksmithing?

Well, I started in that when I was... after we moved to Makanda, that was back in 84, we lived in Cobden. I know I skated that winter to Makanda right through the woods from (?). A big snow was over the fences, them days they had all rail fences and I skated come a rain came on top of that snow and the old ice was slick and held us up and I skated from Cobden to Makanda. My brother was up to Makanda, just started in, him and a fellow by the name of Si Barker, he lived in Cobden and we skated to Makanda. From then on I worked in the shop all my life, that is handling bellows, a hand bellows, to make wind for the fire, build a fire. I went to school there in Makanda, started to school and work in the shop till the bell rung and I'd run all the way up to the school house to go to school. After school I'd run back to the shop. I don't know, I was very young, I had to stand up on a box to pump the bellows. And I commenced in the shop working with wood, making and putting on rims on wagon wheels, buggy wheels. After I got big enough to work why I could make a buggy bed, make a wagon bed, make a whole wagon. It was hard, very hard, a hard way to go in them days too. I'd work, oh, I don't know how many years. Making pillars on a wagon, wheel rim on a buggy, wagon wheels is about an inch and a half and on down to three quarters for a buggy rim. People would come in, I could gauge, I'd have a center gauge to mark the center to bore the holes for the tenon spoke. And I thought, well, people would come in and they would move the gages and I'd have a time then. I had to got it back, set the gauge to right. So, I'd say I'd make me a foolproof gauge, one that they can't nobody work out of size. I was about 16 years old then and I made me a gauge that was always on the center and with that I could make mortis lay out a mortis lay out tenon and get the center of anything. I could pick up a hand saw and run it up and down it and get the center of the hand saw, and they are pretty thin. But, it worked all right; I guess I've got that yet. I have carried it through after I got big enough to work good and I started in on making a wagon. It would take me about, oh, pretty near all winter to make a wagon bed, or a wagon, wheels and all.

----- (second half) 16 Oct. 1966- approaching age of 93.

I was living in Murphysboro with a fellow by the name of Bill Trout, we was pretty good friends so we took a notion to go to Texas. Bill said, "Well, all right we'll go." He said, "I'll go down home and get some money and clothes." I said, "No, we'll go the way we are." We counted our money and we had \$2.00 and something in our pockets, both of us together. We got a freight out of Cobden or Makanda or Murphysboro and went to Cairo, went down to the beach to an old tugboat that went from Cairo to Boggs Point. We got on the boat and the boat broke down and we couldn't go till morning. We stayed there all night on the boat. The next morning, why, they got up and fixed it and be pulled out for Boggs Point. We got to Boggs Point, we beat, we didn't have to pay nothing, someway, I don't know how. We were lucky enough that it didn't cost us

anything. We walked then. We caught a train, a freight, to Paw Paw Junction and from there we caught a freight and went on, I don't know how many miles, and so we came to pine country. I said, "Well, I says we'll walk a while, we'll not ride anymore trains." I said, "We'll sleep in the needles, pine needles, all night." I never did sleep on a bed of pine needles so we went walking, oh, I don't know about 10 or 15 miles, we walked, we had a little valise, crackers and bacon, and stuff. We'd stop awhile, eat bacon and eat then walked awhile. So it came night and we rigged up pine full of needles, a big bed of needles, by a fire in a stump, all cleaned around so the fire wouldn't spread. We slept there all night in the pine needles, it sure was a good night's rest. Then we got up and went on to down to Poplar Bluff. We went on to Fort Worth and Dallas, Texas and we caught a train out of Dallas, a passenger train. We had both been railroading before we left Murphysboro.

Question: Where is this Paw Paw Junction?

It is in Missouri. Then we went on down to Fort Worth, Texas. There was an old farmer, a trapper, he seen something sticking up out of the ground, it looked like a finger. Well, he got a stick, and he dug a while and he found a man, a skeleton. Well he took it up and built, oh just a board, just a clapboard and nail it together and put him in it and come to Fort Worth. It just happened that we was in Fort Worth when he came in with a skeleton. Everybody was there and wanted to see that skeleton, he made a box out of old clapboards to put the fellow in. And I know we jumped up on the wagon wheel of the express wagon when he came in and a barber came out, a colored fellow, and he was standing right on the wheel by me, but on the opposite side. A policeman came along and hit that nigger with the barrel of his gun in his hand and hit the nigger in the head and hit him so hard it jarred me and I jumped off. Well he said, "Get back up there man, he said, and see what you can. We don't allow niggers to get ahead of any white man down here." Well I could pretty near feel the neck where they hit the nigger you hit him so hard. I got in there and seen the skeleton, and Bill got up and he looked at it too. They took him to some building and they made a box to put him in to advertise, you know as a show. And they went from town to town for quite awhile and charged so much for looking at him. We went on down, Bill's father (or brother) ran a boarding house, a railroad boarding house, in Dublin, Texas. So we got to Dublin and from there I said, "We'll get out and run around the town." We saw lots of cattle, longhorn Texas cattle. That was in, well, let's see, I was 18 years old - 16 or 18 or something like that. We went out and looked around, we went through the town. We looked around to see what kind of a job that I wanted. There was no blacksmith shop there that I could get a job at, wood work. So I went down where they had the cattle, feeding cattle. Feeding out, Oh, five or six hundred head, feed and then ship to St. Louis. We'd feed them on cottonseed oil and meal, had four wagons to haul cottonseed hulls and ox team hauling salt and one hauling meal. I fed the cattle there for quite awhile. I got a job, I don't remember what I got paid, wasn't very much though. And the place that we boarded with they went off on a trip so they asked Philo, who was the boss, he asked if any body on the job that could cook a little. Well, I had a good experience in restaurants so I took a job, feeding the men. Eggs cost 3 cents a dozen and we fed them on eggs and bacon. Oh, I don't know, I cooked there about two or three weeks and then the folks came back that lived in the house. I went back to work feeding cattle. We had one big old steer, was in my bunch of feeding, in a trough was made by 20 feet long and made by three by six pine tongue grooved floor so if they had a stampede or anything would be hard to tear up one of those benches, feeding trough. One night cats got to fighting and a

stampede came, well next morning our job to do was to clean up, build a feeding box, tore all of 'em up, made splinters out of 3x6 flooring that the troughs was made out of. Those was big long square end wagons come along filled that trough full and throw off a sack full of meal that weighed 100 lbs. apiece. We'd take 50 pounds of that, and empty about half of that in the trough and pick it up and walk over the hulls then we'd mix it. Well, I had one steer that was pretty good. Well, he got gentle and he carried the seed for me from one trough to the other, and I was just a kid, and I'd lead him by the horn, and lead him to the next trough and I'd take a sack off and empty the sack and a sack to two troughs and the old steer he'd follow me around and he'd carried it for me.

We had one steer, that I couldn't reach from tip to tip and I was about to hook from the end, a curl to the end, and about 6 inches that stuck out straight. It was just as clear as you could see through, pretty near the horn. And I often talked about I'd just give anything if I had his horns sawed off and take my [coleman?] and I told Philo, Philo was the boss. And he said, "Well, he says when you are getting ready to go home we'll just kill him." I said, 'That will be fine. I will just saw it off and take home with me.' I could carry it, you know, home. We fed the cattle out and come around time to ship out. I don't know now how many head we had to ship out. For shipping the boys had ponies, you could get a steer, you wanted to take out and just get the pony to notice the steer you could throw the lines down, by the rein, and that pony wouldn't lose him out about 400 cattle. He'd round 'em up and take them out to the pen. That was a funny thing how that horse would take after the cattle and won't get lost in that many, but he would never lose track of him. Take him to the pen and go back and get another one to drive out and you would just throw the reins down after you seen the one you wanted and he'd follow that steer right on out so he could get to the pen. They would go blind 60 to 90 days, go blind eating the meal, making them go blind but it was sure a fattening. So when it come time to ship and a train load and the boss said you've had experience railroading. I said, "Yes, I use to fire for the railroad." Well, he said, "I'll send you to St. Louis then when we load the cattle." Before he promised Sidney I'd come back and go to Nevada with him and a load of cattle, a load of long steers - yearlings and the cook wagon. We got to St. Louis, we left there on Friday, I was 21 years old and we got into St. Louis on Monday morning, it was warm and I left all I my clothes down there and I was going to catch a train back, they had paid my way. So I got to St. Louis I had a carbuncle on the back of my neck and we rode from Friday evening to Monday morning. I was just about wore out. I had to unload at Muskogee, Oklahoma to feed and water them. We loaded up the next morning, all fed and watered, going on to St. Louis and it was drizzling rain, but when we left Texas it was warm, drizzling rain, kind of a sleet, it was cold and I was just about wore out. I went to the stockyard to turn the cattle over and I went down to the depot and I said "Well, I believe I will go on home." I wasn't goin' back I was going home so I came on back to Murphysboro then and caught the Mobile train and went to the depot and come on back to Murphysboro. That was the end of my trip. I left there when I was 21 years old.